

ARTICLE APPEARED
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WASHINGTON TIMES
12 November 1986

McFarlane urges NSC to tell it all

By Jeremiah O'Leary
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Former National Security Adviser Robert C. McFarlane yesterday urged his successor, John M. Poindexter, to make a full public disclosure of U.S. efforts to obtain the release of American hostages in Lebanon through contacts with Iran.

But, Mr. McFarlane said in an interview, the Reagan administration decided to wait a week in the fading hope that two more Americans might be set free.

Mr. McFarlane declined to discuss details of his dealings with Iran or any role played by Israel.

But he said there was no truth to published reports that he went to Tehran bearing a cake shaped like a key or using a wig as a disguise. "I just don't do things like that," he said.

He also denied carrying a Bible signed by President Reagan as a gift to Iranian religious leaders. "I never heard of the Bible episode until I read about it in the papers. I also was never held prisoner in a Tehran hotel."

"My motive throughout has been the long-range strategic relationship of the U.S. with Iran," Mr. McFarlane said.

He said his efforts for a new relationship between Iran and the United States were under way long before negotiations were launched to obtain the release of David Jacobsen and two other Americans still held hostage in Lebanon by the pro-Iranian Islamic Jihad.

Mr. McFarlane refused to comment on any aspect of the reported deal on U.S. military spare parts for Iran in exchange for hostages. "One thing I learned in Vietnam is that people should never get themselves into situations they can't explain."

He said Mr. Poindexter indicated that the White House wanted to put off full disclosure for about a week in case there is any chance for the release of AP reporter Terry Anderson and Professor Thomas Sutherland. Many U.S. officials believe the administration's Iranian connection dried up when the story of the McFarlane mission was leaked by Iran to a Beirut magazine.

Mr. McFarlane is known to believe that it is in the U.S. strategic interest eventually to establish a new relationship with Iran. Such a change probably could not come while the ailing 86-year-old Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini is still alive. Strategically, Iran is regarded by the United States as an important buffer state between the Soviet Union and the Arabian oilfields.

Meanwhile, Mr. Poindexter has told lawmakers that all appropriate agencies of the U.S. government — including the Pentagon, State Department and CIA — are involved in its attempts to free the remaining U.S. hostages in Beirut, a senior official said yesterday.

This was the first admission by the administration that agencies other than the National Security Council were involved in clandestine efforts to win freedom for the hostages. It calls into question reports that the Defense and State Departments were not kept informed of what was going on.

The official also insisted that the Reagan administration has not circumvented Congress in its attempt to free the hostages. But, he said, the circle of lawmakers who know details of the effort has been kept small in order to prevent leaks.

"Adm. Poindexter explained the hostage situation to key members of Congress," said the official of a meeting Monday between the White House national security adviser and a group of lawmakers.

"Appropriate congressional committees will be informed in full later about the hostages, but at present the very sensitive nature of the channels being used prevents us from proceeding," said the official, who asked not to be named.

"The welfare of the hostages as well as our efforts to free them would be jeopardized if what we told Congress were to become public," the official said.

Mr. Poindexter's briefing apparently was timed to quell growing congressional criticism of a reported deal in which the United States arranged to ship military spare parts to Iran in return for the Nov. 2 release of Mr. Jacobsen in Beirut.

There had been speculation that the operation was coordinated by the NSC to avoid required disclosure to Congress by the CIA and other intelligence agencies.

Mr. Poindexter, however, told lawmakers that the decision to place the NSC in control of the operation was intended to ensure maximum secrecy, not to bypass requirements that Congress be informed of such activities, according to the official.

[A Tehran newspaper reported yesterday that the silence of U.S. officials over Washington's reported overtures to Iran showed that confusion, tension and crisis dominated American policy-making circles.

"One week after revelation of the 'McFarlane affair,' American policymakers have not been able to formulate and present an acceptable explanation," said an editorial in Islamic Republic, which usually reflects Iran's mainstream foreign policy views.]

The official also denied a published report that Mr. Poindexter told lawmakers that the administration had "made a miscalculation" on who could be trusted in Iran to help win release of hostages.

At the same time, the official did not deny that an effort was made to obtain release of all the hostages by trading American military spare parts to the Iranians.

The White House program reportedly arranged for shipments of parts to Iran — using Israel as an intermediary — for use in U.S.-built jet fighters and transport planes purchased before the 1979 Islamic revolution. The shipments apparently were part of a deal to win release of hostages held by a pro-Iranian terrorist group in Beirut.

Most accounts of the U.S.-Iranian contact have portrayed Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger as being aware of the NSC activities but opposed to the plan and uninvolved in it.

Reports of attempted deals for the hostages have become a major embarrassment for the administration because U.S. policy forbids arms shipments to Iran and negotiations with nations that support terrorism.

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Former U.N. Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick said administration efforts to free hostages by offering arms to Iran amounted to paying ransom and said it could lead to more hostage-taking.

Mrs. Kirkpatrick, who was a member of the president's Cabinet until last year, said she had no inside information about the reported secret arms deal. But she said that from what had been made public, she was sure that the administration had not violated any U.S. law in the operation.

"I feel that our government has behaved with meticulous care [to obey the law] about this, but whether

they have behaved wisely is another question," she said at a savings and loan convention in San Francisco.

"History suggests that such dealing on hostages leads to more hostages, just as paying off blackmail leads to more blackmail," she said.

She said that there have been more hostages taken since the United States and France began conducting secret negotiations with Iran.

In Washington, Rep. Howard L. Berman, California Democrat, said any shipment of American arms to Iran would violate two U.S. laws.

Published reports have suggested that spare parts owned by Israel were sent to Iran and that the United States replaced those parts in Israel's inventory.

There was speculation that a secret offer of military parts from the Reagan administration may have encouraged the Iranian government to seek direct shipments from U.S. companies.

Iran asked to buy military helicopter spare parts last month from Bell Helicopter in Fort Worth, Texas, but the company rejected the request the same day, a company spokesman said.

A spokeswoman for the State Department said it was the first time she had heard of Iran trying to buy military parts directly from an American company.

In the 1970s, during the reign of Shah Reza Pahlavi, Bell sold 250 model 214A transports, 200 Cobra gunships and 29 model 214C transports to Iran, Mr. Tipton said.

On Monday night, Sen. Barry Goldwater, an Arizona Republican who is chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said that if reports of an administration arms deal with Iran were true, "then it's the biggest mistake this country's ever made."

Mr. Goldwater, who is retiring from the Senate, said he understood the president's motives but still could not justify any administration dealings with Iran.

This article is based in part on wire service reports